



## **Longer-term Support: Guidance for Responders**

Disaster Action is a charity whose members are survivors and bereaved from UK and overseas disasters. One of our aims is to raise awareness of the needs of those directly affected by disaster amongst emergency responders. The following leaflet has been written for responders and has arisen out of our collective experience of 25 disasters.

### **How long do individuals need support for following a disaster (both bereaved and survivors)?**

People's response to a disaster depends on the individual. There are some whose need for support (from others affected and/or from support services) is very much in the immediate aftermath. For others, it may be some time after the event (six months, a year or even considerably longer) when the impact on their lives is such that they may turn to external support, or to others directly affected.

It should be borne in mind that those affected by less high profile and/or smaller incidents have felt that their needs are less well recognised and catered for than those affected by larger scale disasters.

In terms of organised services, any transition from full time provision to part time and then the closure of a service should be managed with considerable care. Good and sensitive communication is vital and consulting users on what they would wish for, and when, may also be a valuable exercise. Any consultation process must have real substance.

In previous disasters, maintaining contact with a key worker through a telephone support service, after the closure of a drop-in centre (such as provided by Camden following the 1987 King's Cross underground fire) has been of considerable value. This service remained in place for three years after that disaster, when those affected could still discuss issues of importance to them and, most importantly, continue to receive information and signposting to other services. (See below also.)

Our comments should be read in terms of a general need for services, within which there may be a centre such as the 7 July Assistance Centre, which developed following the closure of the Family Assistance Centre in London in August 2005, but not exclusively so.

### **What type of support is most useful in the long-term?**

#### Organised service provision

Disaster Action promotes a needs-driven, user-led approach to organised service provision, which is intended not to be a substitute for self-support, but an adjunct to it. The ideal is to enable people to help themselves, while facilitating access to ongoing practical/medical/financial/legal help for those who may fall through gaps, or for whom disaster-related needs may not become apparent until some time after the disaster. This could include, for example, longer-term health consequences or support needs that may arise out of life-changing physical injury. The need for practical/medical/financial/legal help to be available may continue for a considerable period of time.

The most effective support is a practical, signposting (or 'gateway') service that enables people to access the services they may require (including psychological intervention if needed). In the past, such services have been provided through drop-in centres, outreach services, telephone helplines and virtual (Internet-based) support networks.

## Guidance for Responders

### Longer-term Support

Clear information on the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved should be made available, as well as clear signposting on accessing available support services. It is essential that support is offered on a non-judgemental basis and that those providing services are appropriately trained, experienced and supported. It is useful if those involved in running such support services are in contact with other agencies and bodies that are involved in aspects of the aftermath (most particularly the police, central and local government).

### Independent action/support groups

Many people find the mutual support of others affected by their own, and sometimes other, disaster(s) to be particularly helpful and in some cases even the most valuable form of support. An important implication of this is that those providing services should make available, at the earliest opportunity, the means for those directly affected to be in contact with and meet each other if they wish to. This may include the provision of meeting spaces and other practical assistance such as help with travel arrangements and providing refreshments. Anything more organised may be controlling, and unhelpfully stifle the emergence of the independent qualities that make such self-help and self-determining support groups so beneficial for those who choose to join them. It should be for the individuals affected to decide for themselves whether, when and why they may wish to form a group, as well as how any such group might be run (see Disaster Action leaflets *Setting up Survivor and/or Family Support Groups* and *Setting up an E-forum Discussion Group*).

The desire to meet and join with others affected by a disaster may emerge very soon after the incident, or not for some months or even years afterwards.

### Smaller/facilitated support groups

Following disasters, some people have found it helpful to participate in smaller groups with a focus on emotional support and an opportunity to talk about their personal experiences of disaster and recovery. The ways in which these groups have been organised, and their relationship to the type of independent action/support groups mentioned above, can vary. For example, following the 11<sup>th</sup> September attacks, such smaller groups were organised some months after the formation of the main group and initiated by members of that group themselves. By contrast, after the 2004 South East Asia Tsunami, those formally providing the Tsunami Support Network before the independent group was formed facilitated the smaller groups.

The need for, nature and way in which such facilitated support groups may work will vary considerably. Sensitive and appropriate management is required for them to be effective. We have found that they work best when organised and facilitated by those with appropriate expertise, experience and knowledge of trauma and disasters (as opposed to general bereavement and counselling). In addition, a solid professional grounding in ethical issues is needed. Facilitators should also understand the dynamics of such groups (such as the fact that in some cases survivor only and/or bereaved only membership works best), and be fully aware of the role and relationship between these groups and other recovery-related strategies and services.

At the same time, responders should understand that many people will not find this approach appropriate for their needs as individuals.

### Memorial services/acts of remembrance

As well as initial memorial services shortly after a disaster, it is to be expected that a disaster should be marked on future anniversaries. This is the case for disasters of whatever origin. In the shorter term, those affected will wish to know that their suffering and that of their loved ones continues to be recognised and acknowledged by the wider community, and by government. Involving the bereaved in arrangements for the events is an important consideration. In the longer term, families and survivors may wish to make arrangements themselves for such acts of remembrance.

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A key service is financial support to attend memorial services for those who need to travel. It is also likely that those affected will expect to see central and local government support for the creation of a permanent memorial to those who died.

### Criminal Inquiries/Inquest Process

Many of those affected will wish to have continuing information, through informed sources (i.e. the police, the coroner, etc.) concerning the judicial processes. In addition, families and friends may benefit from support during and at any relevant hearings, which may not take place for a considerable time after the disaster. Many individuals will wish to have detailed answers to their questions about why and how a disaster occurred, and what happened in the aftermath. Others may choose not to ask for/have such information.

There are a number of examples of support services that have been of benefit to families through the inquest and any criminal trial. In the case of the Lockerbie disaster, funding and support services were made available through the United States Office for Victims of Crime to set up live video links to the trial of those accused of the bombing (12 years after the bombing). The services included financial support to travel to the video links and travel and accommodation costs for those who wished to attend the trial for a period. A secure website was made available to families, with detailed information about the conduct of the trial. This support had a highly practical focus, but psychological support was also made available.

### The Role of Disaster Action

In the longer term, the greatest source of support for those affected by a disaster is likely to be from those who have been affected by the same incident, both in terms of individual relationships and as distinct groups. In addition, for some, the opportunity to meet with those who have experienced other disasters can be helpful, whether in the short or longer term. Disaster Action was formed in response to this need. In 1991, its founder members came together in recognition of the value of collective experience in offering mutual support as well as the opportunity to educate and advocate a more effective culture of disaster prevention and management.

Disaster Action is not a frontline responder to disaster. As an independent advocacy and advisory service representing the interests of those directly affected, we can offer guidance and the benefit of our extensive experience to those providing individual and collective support services. This can be done through telephone and email (and meetings if appropriate). We recommend that survivors and bereaved people should be made aware of Disaster Action and given access to our leaflet series, **When Disaster Strikes**, which can be downloaded from our website. In addition, we can help facilitate the coming together of independent survivor/family groups.

### Other Guidance for Responders Leaflets

*Disaster Victim Identification: Issues for Families and Implications for Police Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) and Coroner's Officers (COs)*

*Working with Disaster Survivors and the Bereaved: Code of Practice on Privacy, Anonymity & Confidentiality*

### Contacting Disaster Action

If you are planning or providing longer-term services and wish to discuss any issues with Disaster Action, please call 01483 799066, or write to us at No. 4, 71 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 7DB.